

Texas at a Crossroads



Excellent and Equitable Schools – or Merely Adequate

Albert Cortez, Ph.D., and María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, Ph.D.

A lot of people are talking about the special session of the Texas Legislature that may be called to focus on school funding. Children and teachers are not the only ones who will be impacted by what is decided there. In fact, all families, taxpayers, business owners, college and university staff, and community leaders will undoubtedly feel the effects of those decisions.

For many, this upcoming debate will be a momentous one that will shape the future of not only Texas, but the entire region. Since Texas is seen as a precursor to many significant demographic trends that will eventually impact much of the country, these decisions may have long-term, profound implications for the nation as a whole.

What’s at Stake?

Texas is faced with a choice. One option is to continue our long and difficult struggle to create a public school system that serves all students and communities in a fair and equitable manner. The other option is to retreat in the face of relentless opposition from those who are committed to less - less opportunity for most children, less equity for most communities, less fairness in tax burdens, and less parity in access to college and academic scholarships.

A few people may scoff at such characterizations and try to diminish the significance of the upcoming battle. But for those who have been at the forefront of the decades-long challenge to make public schools more equitable for all children, the stakes are very clear and very big.

After the smoke has cleared, the Texas system of funding public schools will either be more equitable or less equitable. It either will ensure that all children are subject to the same educational options, or it will revert to a system that provides minimums for most of its children while limiting excellence to a favored few. It either will remain one equalized system, or it will splinter into two segregated systems - one for middle- and low-income families and the other for upper-income families.

Our school funding system is likely to be changed, given the pressure that is forthcoming from opposing camps. The outcome of this confrontation may depend on which side makes its case most effectively.

There may be proclaimed “winners” and “losers.” But ultimately, children’s lives will be at play. For their sake as well as our collective sake, the upcoming “game” should be played openly and fairly. Unfortunately, the extent to which that occurs may depend on who chooses to engage in the forthcoming conversations and with what kind of intent.

IDRA has adopted a creed that proposes that, whatever state policymakers and others do regarding children, they should at a minimum do no harm. Determining whether any new funding policy hurts any child will be the basis for our assessment of the legislature’s upcoming action on public school finance.

Framing the Debate

Some groups that are pressing for changes in the state's school funding system represent the interests of a small number of school districts that see themselves as somehow "unfairly" impacted by the state's recapture provisions. Recapture is the part of the funding system that re-allocates state resources that are concentrated in a small number of wealthy districts to help fund the overall cost of public education.

Representing less than 8 percent of school systems, these school officials complain that they are "victimized" by such actions that diminish their ability to provide the quality of education that they prefer for their children.

Disregarded in the discussion is the fact that the court's decision on the Edgewood Texas school funding cases criticized the old funding plans for their failure to fully utilize all the property wealth in the state to finance public schools. Prior to the current plan, 25 percent of the state's taxable property wealth was available to less than 5 percent of its pupils.

Recognizing that it was the state's responsibility to fund public education, the court noted that the Texas school funding plan "should utilize all of the state property wealth" regardless of the locale. So if we were to revert to an approach that would once again limit access to 25 percent of the state property wealth to only 5 percent of the state's pupils (as proposed by those who want to eliminate the recapture provisions) we would subject the state to new court challenges of its inefficiency.

Misconception that Local Action Creates High Wealth Districts

The contemporary debates about equity and sharing of property tax revenue often overlook the fact that wealthy districts in most cases did not create their own wealth. Above-average wealth in many cases is an accident of location, where mineral wealth was found long after school district boundaries were drawn.

In other communities, wealth was created by the collective efforts of diverse interests that may have included state leaders, county government, and city and local officials. Such was the case in the recruitment of the Dell and Motorola facilities in the Austin area and the upcoming Toyota plant in San Antonio. All taxpayers in the state are footing the bill for such initiatives.

If individual districts did not create their wealth, then it is really the state's resource. And if it is indeed a state resource, then all Texans should benefit from that resource. The issue, however, is not one of affluent communities vs. less affluent communities.

This is a larger question of whether a child's education should be based on the wealth of the area in which he or she happens to reside.

The Basis for the Current Funding System

The current Texas funding plan was created in response to a court ruling that the previous system perpetrated inequality in both local property taxes and local school spending. Differences in districts' ability to subsidize education now are neutralized by state equalization funding, which takes into account local taxable property wealth and its implications for raising local education funding.

Before equalization, many Texas school systems were not concerned about the overall quality of Texas public education. Since they were able to raise more than enough funding from local taxes, they were not concerned about the quality of schooling in other communities.

Under the existing system, all school systems have a stake in the state funding plan. If the level of support is insufficient for some, all share an interest in increasing the overall level of state support.

Like our highways that serve the state as a whole and are not built based on the wealth of communities they connect, schools should provide equitable education for all students. Students educated in San Antonio may wind up as workers in Austin, Dallas, Houston, El Paso, or find employment in the Panhandle or East Texas. It does not make economic sense to provide differing levels of educational opportunity to a common, shared resource.

As the court ruled, in order to have an equitable funding system, we must ensure that all schools in all school systems receive similar revenues for similar levels of local tax effort. Though not perfect, the current school funding structure still has the potential to provide the greatest level of educational equity available for all students, schools and taxpayers in Texas' modern era. This level of equity however cannot be sustained without the infusion of additional, equitably-distributed state revenues that benefit all schools.

The Case Against Adequacy

People in East Texas do not complain about having to equitably subsidize the extensive state highway network. No one is clamoring to have adequate state roads in some communities and excellent state-funded roads in rich communities.

But we are faced with the question of whether we strive for excellence for all students or adequacy for some and excellence for a favored few.

There are those who want to retreat from the ideal of equity and excellence and substitute a system that would ensure merely an adequate education for most while at the same time allowing only a few to have more. Rather than one fully equalized system for all Texas children, those proponents support two separate and unequal systems based on economic segregation - one that is adequate for many and excellent for only a few.

These proponents believe that the state should be responsible for funding only an "adequate" level of education. They argue that the state need only fund, and thus equalize, only the minimum that may be required to comply with state education standards.

Toward this end, state leaders have commissioned a study of what it would take to fund an "adequate" education. But how one defines adequate determines what that concept will cost.

State researchers have chosen to define adequacy based on selected student outcomes - more specifically on the number of students passing tests that were part of the old state testing system, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS).

Though some preferred to use the new state TAKS assessments, the fact that the new test only had one year of data precluded the use of this newer test data.

But an adequate, or minimum, performance on one state-mandated exam is not a suitable indicator of the quality of any student's education. Education experts agree that no single indicator is enough.

The issue of adequacy has not been addressed in earlier court hearings on the school finance issue. Extensive debates can be expected on whether striving for adequacy is a good state policy objective.

The United States has never settled for being average or minimum, but rather has always strived to be the best - to be excellent.

The state of Texas has never settled for being the minimum at anything - whether it is in football or industry. Imagine a slogan that reads, "Texas, the land of the adequate." Texans would not settle for surgery performed by adequate doctors, drive over bridges built by adequate engineers, or fly in adequate planes that are built by adequate workers and flown by adequate pilots. They would not trust their investments to adequate bankers or send their children to schools that strive to be merely adequate. Yet, we may soon be in the midst of deliberations that would provide funding formulas for adequate education.

In debates over how much funding is needed to achieve certain outcomes, it has become increasingly apparent to some state leaders that the issue is mostly about how much money lawmakers are willing to invest in public education. Adequacy proponents suggest that the state should not be obligated to provide excellent schools when adequate schools will suffice. If that were the case, the only way to be fair would be to limit everyone to the same low expectation.

Press education adequacy proponents and they will acknowledge that after the state meets its funding obligation for adequacy, they would allow limitless local enrichment in wealthy districts to supplement the adequate program that is funded by the state. Thus, a few would still have a lot more.

But unequal local enrichment was the very reason that the Texas system of funding was first found to be unconstitutional. If local schools were to once again provide unequal amounts of local funding that depended on very unequal local district property wealth, the state would regress to a funding plan that resulted in gross inequality in educational opportunity for millions of Texas school children.

In George Orwell's classic book, *Animal Farm*, the animals overthrow the human overseers. The new political leadership of animals promotes the slogan that all animals are equal. As they gain more power, the concept changes: "All are equal, but some are more equal than others."

We do not believe that most parents, businesses or citizens will settle for what is adequate over what is excellent. Excellence without equity is impossible. Equity without excellence is a sham.

Excellence for the few and adequacy for the many violates the promise of America and the proud heritage of Texas.

Whichever road will be taken in the near future will dictate the future of Texas for generations to come. Let us hope that for our sake and the sake of our children, that our political leaders

choose the noble highway, rather than the easy path. Texans must let its political leaders know that they must do no harm to a single child.

Albert Cortez, Ph.D., is the director of the IDRA Institute for Policy and Leadership. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, Ph.D., is the IDRA executive director. Comments and questions may be directed to them via e-mail at feedback@idra.org.

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Unequal educational opportunity is bad public policy. It is bad for public schools, bad for businesses, bad for taxpayers, and, most importantly, bad for children.

It is bad for public schools because it creates an education system of haves and have nots. And the haves would refuse to share their wealth. Furthermore, since wealthy schools would not need state funding, they would oppose increasing funding for the overall school funding plan. Without universal support for high quality schools for all, a few would tend to outspend the rest, a condition deemed unconstitutional by the Texas courts.

Unequal educational opportunity is bad for business because, from a workforce viewpoint, it creates very uneven levels of education for different students. This leads to big differences in work readiness in the Texas workforce.

Research on the impact of poor schooling indicates that businesses are forced to spend billions of dollars on employee training when schools do not have enough resources to provide high quality education to local graduates.

Unequal educational opportunity is bad for taxpayers because an un-equalized funding system causes some people with homes and businesses of equal value to pay higher local property taxes than others. In fact, it was this inequality in tax burdens that was one of the major factors that caused the Texas school funding system to be considered unconstitutional.

Unequal educational opportunity is bad for children because the quality of a child's education and his or her subsequent chances to attend college and have a better life is compromised from the day he or she first steps through the schoolroom door. This makes the wealth of your family and the neighborhood in which you happen to live the major factor dictating the quality of your neighborhood children's schooling.

Excerpted from [Fair Funding for Texas School Children](#), Texas education policy digest series (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, 2002).